



Raptors help control rodents, snakes in landscapes

Scott Cotton

Human civilization has introduced challenges and benefits to raptor species.

Some landscape disturbances have eroded the feeding and nesting patterns of hawks, eagles, kestrels, and falcons, while others have provided increased opportunities for some species.

Building raptor perches where appropriate provides a corridor for raptors to become more active on a landscape. This article discusses why these are sometimes established and how.

About Raptors and Perches

Raptors are migratory birds of prey such as falcons, hawks, eagles, kestrels, owls, and others. The nesting requirements, hunting patterns, and food sources of each raptor species vary greatly as do their migration pathways; however, many of these species have been shown to utilize perches in their preferred habitat.

Benefits of Raptors on a Landscape

Raptors help control rodents, snakes, and protect crops. According

to research conducted by Oregon State University, an adult barn owl will consume 10-12 rodents daily, and a family of these owls can remove as many as 3,000 rodents each year.

In Pennsylvania, Colorado, and New York, producers of high value crops such as melons, grapes, fruit, and organic products are placing raptor perches near fields to control smaller bird species and rodent species. Studies recommend that one perch every 200 feet around a field perimeter can provide optimum control, and one perch provides control for about 5 acres.

Strategic placement of perches for hawks near concentrations of rodents such as prairie dog towns can provide some balanced, natural control for that species and for snakes.

Bear in mind raptors can prey upon or reduce the activities of other bird species.

Downside of Raptor Activity

Raptors have had to rely on manmade structures, such as power poles, where natural perching areas

(for example, snags) have been reduced. Since raptors expand their wings to take off, bird electrocutions and related power outages associated with raptors perching have occurred.

Power companies now often provide offset perches on poles, which land the bird out of contact distance with power wires.

Before creating new perching areas on or near your property, keep in mind some species of raptors will prey on kittens, chicks, ducklings, and other small animals. Many raptor species pass through areas seasonally and will not be problematic year-round. Owls tend to be hard on poultry, cats, and other small targets.

There are other instances when encouraging more raptors by erecting artificial perches may not be appropriate, such as when there are a species of concern (for example, sage grouse) in the area that may be potential prey. Consult your local Wyoming Game and Fish Department personnel to determine any local concerns.

Scott Cotton is a University of Wyoming Extension educator based in Natrona County and also serving Converse and Niobrara counties. He can be contacted at (307) 235-9400 or at secotton@natronacounty-wy.gov.

Constructing, erecting raptor perches

When you have done your homework and have determined that erecting a raptor perch is appropriate for your area, raptor studies provide us with some information to help create suitable perches.

The higher the perch, the farther a raptor can see and hunt, in general. Experts in raptor study indicate that the comfort (the size of the crossbars in relation to talon size) of a perch is more significant than height.

Most recommendations are a raptor perch needs to be 15-20 feet above ground. Remember to place perches in a location that allows a clear glide path down and away from the perch.

In areas where only crop protection, viewing, or rodent control are the main goals, many specifications call

for the upright to be made of $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch to 2-inch galvanized pipe. This prevents some other species such as raccoons, house cats, and squirrels, from climbing the pole.

In areas where grazing animals will be moving around, and scratching on, a pole, a pole 8 inches to a foot in diameter is recommended so it's less likely to be knocked over.

In many areas of the Intermountain West, metal upright poles may also serve as a lightning rod if they are one of the higher structures around.

Whether smaller or larger poles, the upright must have an additional 36 to 42 inches of length that can be set in the ground with tamping or concrete.

Determine the crossbar composition and design before erecting a pole. Larger raptor species like larger crossbars, such as a 2x6 or 2x4, while smaller raptors prefer a 1.5-inch crossbar. In addition, some species like carpeting or Astroturf on the bar. Make sure to get the carpet or artificial grass without the closed loops, which can snag raptor talons. Bare wood crossbars rounded at the ends and roughed up with a rasp work well.

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) publication *Artificial Perches for Raptors* recommends running the crossbar east-west. Other groups have combined ideas by running a 2-inch crossbar northeast-southwest and another smaller 1.5-inch crossbar northwest-southeast. This allows use of the perch by different species at different times of the year.

Visit with the NRCS since perches are listed as wildlife habitat enhancements, and talk to local game and fish authorities about their programs and goals.

So once you:

1. Visit with neighbors and take their needs into consideration,
2. Find a suitable location,
3. Dig a 40-inch deep hole, and
4. Place a suitable crossbar on top of an 18- to 23-foot pole, then

Erect perches away from roads, houses, and other areas of human and pet activity.

Avoid placing perches within 400 feet of power lines, guywires, and other obstructions and place perches out of line-of-sight with poultry housing unless willing to do exceptional protection measures for the poultry. Do not provide food to the perch or disturb it in any way.

Once a perch is started, observe and log which species use the perch throughout the year and capture some great photos (from a distance)!

RAPTOR PERCH DESIGN

